Abba Eban is memorialized — friend, statesman and intellectual

BY **J. CORRESPONDENT** MARCH 7, 2003

JERUSALEM — To the world, he was Abba Eban, Israel's eloquent and much admired spokesman, statesman and historian. To his family and friends he remained Aubrey.

A memorial tribute to Eban, who died Nov. 17, was held last month at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute by the Hebrew University's Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace and the university's Abba Eban Archives Center.

Eminent historian Professor Bernard Lewis set the tone for the familiar.

A contemporary of Eban's, who knew him in London, Cambridge, Oxford, and, of course, in Israel, Lewis appealed for the indulgence of an overflow audience to permit him to refer to Eban as Aubrey.

Lewis said he had little to do with Abba Eban the public figure. "Aubrey was my friend." It was a friendship that spanned 70 years.

Lewis recalled a meeting with Eban in Jerusalem in 1945 a meeting that they had each remembered differently. They had dined at the Eden Hotel. "Those who share my antiquity may recall it," quipped the octogenarian.

They discussed three options that Eban had been offered. One was a fellowship at Cambridge that could have led to a distinguished career in Oriental studies. The second was an invitation by the British Labor Party to contest a constituency. The third was a request from Moshe Sharett, whose name was Shertok in those days, to stay in Jerusalem and help the Jewish Agency.

According to Lewis, Eban asked: "Do you think my style of oratory would be suited to the House of Commons?"

To which Lewis retorted: “No, I think it would be more suited to the House of Lords.”

Eban, said Lewis, had no recollection of that particular conversation. What Eban had remembered was Lewis telling him that if he chose the Jewish Agency he would never be heard of again. Lewis could not remember making any such comment.

Veteran Ha’aretz diplomatic and political correspondent Akiva Eldar, who not only wrote about Eban but was his personal friend, spoke of how Eban’s witticisms and turns of speech became famous. His best-known and most quoted quip was: “The Arabs never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity.”

Another well-known Ebanism was: “We Israelis always make the right decisions after we have exhausted all other options.”

Few other statesmen have succeeded in starting a new career after retirement and once again reaching the top, said Eldar. Eban used his “Heritage” and “A Nation is Born” television series, which were screened around the globe, to continue to be a spokesmen for Israel in an indirect fashion. “He did not try to prettify Israel where there were wrinkles,” said Eldar. “The overall picture of Israel was clear and credible.”

Former Prime Minister Shimon Peres, who was the keynote speaker at the event, said that while no one could imitate Eban’s gifts, talents and brilliance, they could learn from his policies and his diplomacy.

“He came as a legend to our country,” said Peres, who had first heard about him from Berl Katznelson, who had met Eban in London and had been enormously impressed.

“When Aubrey came, we were not disappointed. The person lived up to the legend.”

Harking back to the early days of the state, Peres said: “We were small, outgunned and outnumbered, always on the verge of a catastrophe, always remembering the destruction of the Second Temple.”

Eban’s diplomatic legacy, Peres continued, was to lay the foundations for an understanding between the Palestinians and Israel through U.N. resolutions 242 and 338. “Without this formula we would not have been able to negotiate with the Egyptians and the Jordanians,” he said.

Suzy Eban said of her husband of almost 60 years: “Aubrey needed broad intellectual scope in the same way one needs air.” He always felt the full weight of the responsibility of every word and every idea he conveyed in the service of Israel, she said.